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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal issues such as loneliness, intimacy, conflict, communication, assertion, aggression, and insecurity form the bulk of any clinician's concerns, yet the therapies offered to clients are mainly individual. The study of interpersonal relationships provides a necessary link between the person and the mainly social environment in which he lives. There are six major ideas in the conception of interpersonal relationships. The first main idea is interdependence, the notion that a relationship exists when the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of each person are influenced by the behavior of the other. Second is the idea of recurrent interaction pattern. The form of any continuing relationship is defined by the pattern of recurrent interaction that goes on between or among the people in the relationship. Third is the concept of interaction episode. Episodes are the basic materials that make up relationships, and provide the basic data required for the study of relationships. A fourth concept concerns the linkage of personal characteristics with the courses of interactions and relationships. A fifth concept is the connection between person and environment; the idea that environmental conditions influence interactions and interactions influence the surrounding environment. The final general concept is the assumption of circular causality in examining linkages among personal dispositions, interpersonal relationships, and societal conditions. (NB)

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Interpersonal Relationships as a Link Between Person and Environment

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Most of the problems clinicians face in daily practice are either directly interpersonal in their nature or have important interpersonal ramifications. Loneliness and intimacy, conflict and communication, assertion, aggression, insecurity--these are all interpersonal issues, and these are the problems that form the bulk of any clinician's concerns. Even problems like autism and bipolar affective disorders, which appear to be primarily biological in origin, have powerful effects on others, as any clinician who has worked with the parents of an autistic child or the children of a severely depressed mother will attest. Yet the therapies we offer our patients are still mainly individual. Behavioral, psychodynamic, it doesn't matter, the solo person is still the primary focus of concern.

Family therapies are becoming popular these days, but the theoretical foundations of those therapies are poorly linked with general psychological theory, systematic methods for assessing family function are ill defined, and sound research on process and outcome of family therapy is rarely seen. Research in personality, as usually conducted, does not provide the information needed for the study of interpersonal process. I propose that the social psychology of interpersonal behavior requires a conception, a methodology, and a substance of its own, and that the study of interpersonal relationships

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provides a necessary link between the person and the (mainly social) environment in which our lives are lived.

The conception I will summarize is drawn largely from a book entitled Close Relationships, which nine of us--Harold Kelley, Ellen Berscheid, Andrew Christensen, John Harvey, Ted Huston, George Levinger, Evie McClintock, Anne Peplau, and I--hammered out over a period of three and a half years (Kelley et al., 1983). The clinical implications of the model are extended and some related models are presented in the Handbook of Interpersonal Psychotherapy edited by Jack Anchin and Donald Kiesler (1982). Pertinent research is reviewed in both books. I will mention an example of some of the research in these remarks.

Here are some of the main ideas in the conception of interpersonal relationships we are developing.

1. First is the notion of interdependence. A relationship exists when the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of each person are influenced by the behavior of the other.

2. Next is the idea of recurrent interaction pattern. The form of any continuing relationship is defined by the pattern of recurrent interactions that go on between or among the people in the relationship. This is a complex idea that implies, among other things, that understanding relationships requires study of the processes of interaction, over time, in natural settings. Nothing else - no test, no laboratory analogue - can offer the information required for accurate characterization of relationships.

3. Third is the concept of interaction episode. Episodes are the basic materials that make up relationships, and provide the basic data required for the study of relationships. In the simplest dyadic case,

we consider only two people, each of whom moves through a chain of events that involves a continual flow of thoughts, feelings, and actions. These events are interconnected within each chain and the two chains are causally connected with each other.

Insert Figure 2.1 about here

Suppose a young man and a young woman are at a party together. They don't know each other yet, but they notice each other, and some mutual interests begin to stir. You are there too. You're watching them, and you see the young woman say something to the man. He blushes, and a little while later they are both smiling at each other. What happened? Maybe something like this. The young woman is thinking, "I'd like to meet that guy, but what can I say?" A little later she finds herself beside him at the bar, and on inspiration says, "That's a very nice looking jacket you're wearing. I like the way it fits you." He has been eyeing her too. He is pleased, but taken aback by her remark, and doesn't know what to say. "Thank you" doesn't seem quite right. So he blushes. She thinks, "My God, I've embarrassed him--he'll think I'm coming on too strong," but she notices no real avoidance in the way he looks or moves, so she thinks, "Well, maybe I didn't go too far," and she smiles. He thinks, "Hmm, she seems to like me," blushes some more, and smiles back. And so on.

Insert Figure 2.2 about here

An episode begins when the action of one person influences the thoughts, feelings, or actions of another, continues as long as interdependent effects persist, and ends when active influence stops, usually with the physical separation of the people involved. It is obviously possible to break the episode down into smaller components as I just did in my analysis, and to link episodes together in larger configurations, all the way to the lifelong career of the most enduring relationships. We believe, however, that the episode is a good place to start most descriptions of interaction processes. It is a convenient, naturally identifiable, not entirely arbitrary unit that is interesting in its own right and lends itself readily to more microscopic analyses as well as useful aggregations on the molar side.

4. A fourth concept concerns the linkage of personal characteristics with the courses of interactions and relationships. The personal characteristics of participants influence the relationships they enter, and the cumulative, combined relationships people experience influence trans-situational personality dispositions. A paranoid person in a family will affect relationships in that family profoundly. Conversely, it is probable that paranoid dispositions develop mainly through interactions, both real and imagined, with other people.

5. Now we reach the connection between person and environment. A fifth concept is that environmental conditions influence interactions and interactions influence the surrounding environment.

Insert Figure 2.3 about here

Figure 2.3 illustrates one form the connection may take. Let me give you an example. David Mechanic and some colleagues recently established an institute for research on aging at Rutgers University. David invited several of the senior faculty of our school to join, including Milt Schwebel, who knows a lot about cognitive processes. Milt and I got to thinking and then we started talking about the possibility of collaborating in some research on cognitive development and interpersonal relationships in the later years. That is, we had some interactions. We extended our relationship in this regard. Now, if Milt and I go ahead with our project, we will draw some others into it, we will do it under the aegis of the institute, and maybe, eventually, we will have some effect on the more general social environment we all are living in.

It seems to me the effect of the small group on social and political process is not sufficiently appreciated by psychologists, historians, or social scientists in other disciplines. Major historical changes are attributed either to individuals or to the general Zeitgeist, slighting the important, possibly essential role of interpersonal processes in small groups. I think it is true that every social revolution in history has begun with a small band of zealots. Hitler and his Brownshirts in the cellars of Munich; Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks in Russia; Adams, Paine and other revolutionaries in America; Jesus of Nazareth and the disciples. Charismatic leaders and propitious cultural conditions are needed too, but I believe the driving motivational force and the sustaining support needed to bring about significant, lasting social change comes mainly from a closely knit, interdependent group of people.

6. A final general concept: In examining linkages among personal dispositions, interpersonal relationships, and societal conditions, circular causality is assumed.

Insert Figure 12.1 about here

Here, modestly located at the center of the social universe, are interpersonal relationships. These relationships, through their cognitive, affective and behavioral residuals, affect the personal dispositions of individuals. Personal dispositions, in turn, affect relationships. Relationships can affect the social environment, as just described, and the social environment as well as the physical environment can affect relationships. The scheme ties quite a few conditions and processes together in a reasonably coherent way.

If I had more time, I would now describe some fascinating research on destructive and constructive marital conflicts. The research is based on detailed, blow-by-blow accounts of fights and quarrels between husbands and wives. The accounts were written independently by each partner shortly after the conflicts occurred. Analyses have shown, among other things, that the main flow of events in marital conflict is expressed in the affects that the partners experience and express, that the courses of constructive and destructive conflicts are very different, and that simple notions of complementarity in reciprocal processes of interaction (ideas proposed by Leary, Kiesler and others that anger provokes anger and love begets love, for example) require considerable qualification. The article will appear in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology if I ever get around to some revisions a couple of sharp reviewers have wisely demanded.

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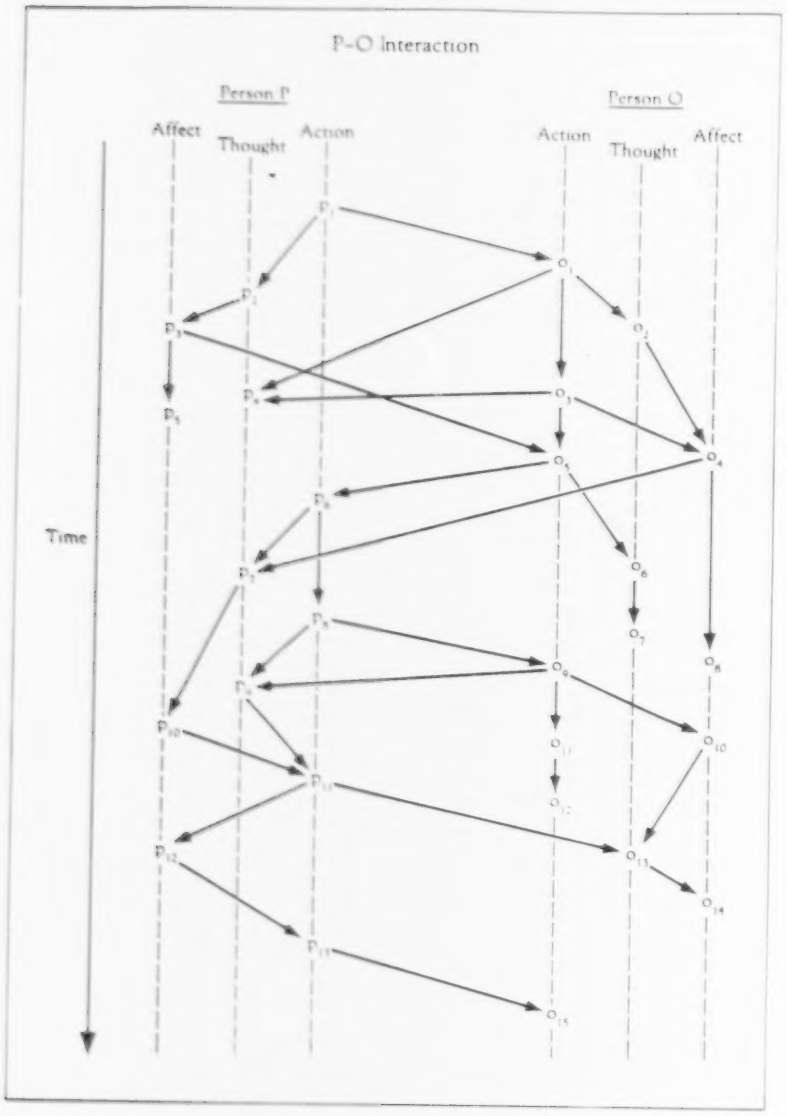

FIGURE 2.1
The basic data of a dyadic relationship. Each person has a chain of events, each chain including affect, thought, and action. The events are causally connected within each chain (shown by arrows from one p to another or from one o to another) and the two chains are causally interconnected (shown by arrows from a p to an o or from an o to a p). The interchain connections constitute the essential feature of interpersonal relationships.

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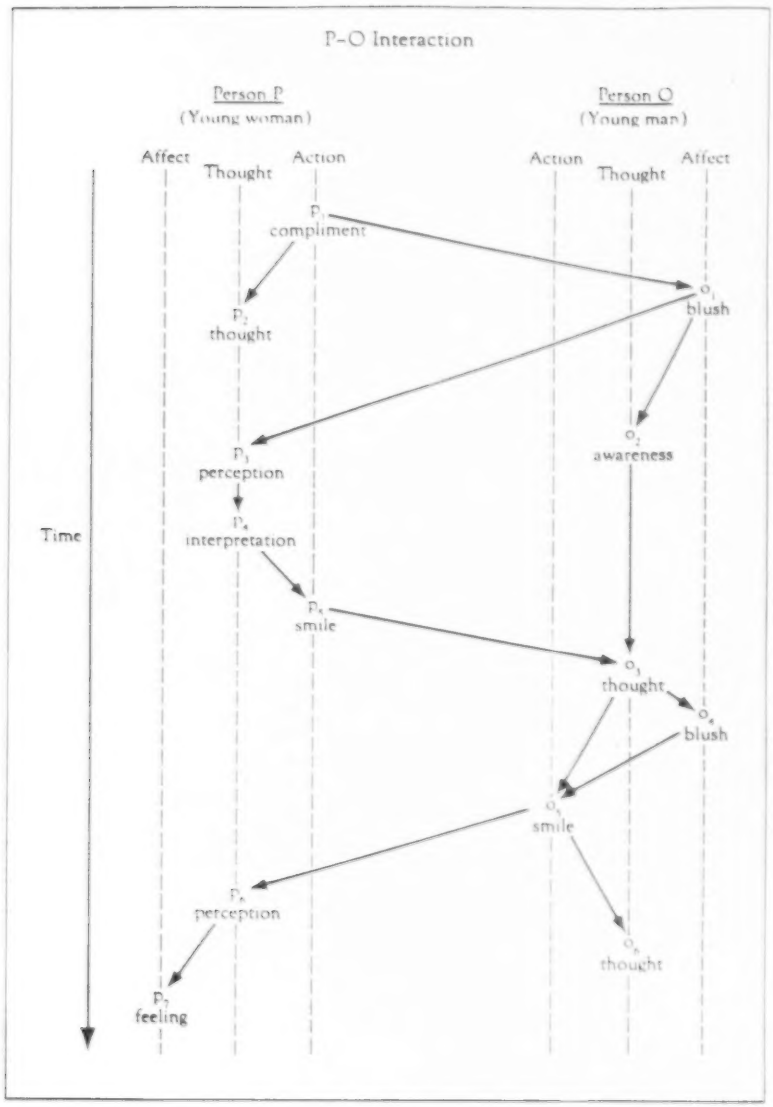

FIGURE 2.2
Brief portion of interaction between a young woman and man. The events in each person's chain of affect, thought, and action tend to produce further effects within that chain (shown by the p-to-p and o-to-o causal connections) and effects in the other person's chain (shown by the p-to-o and o-to-p causal connections).

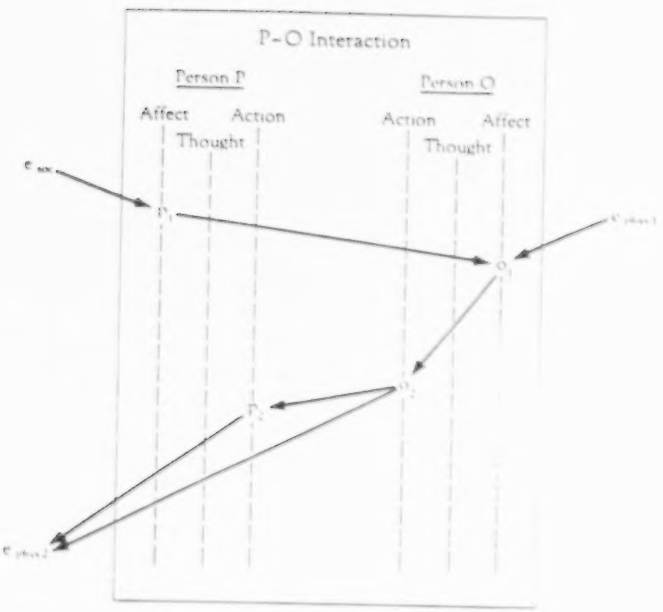

FIGURE 2.3
Illustration of external causal connections of the P–O interaction. An event in the social environment (e_{soc}) causes an affective event in P's chain (p_1). The latter event, together with an event in the physical environment ($e_{phys\,1}$), produces affect (o_1) in O that leads O to action, o_2. O's action stimulates P also to act (p_2), and their actions jointly serve to cause a change in the physical environment ($e_{phys\,2}$).

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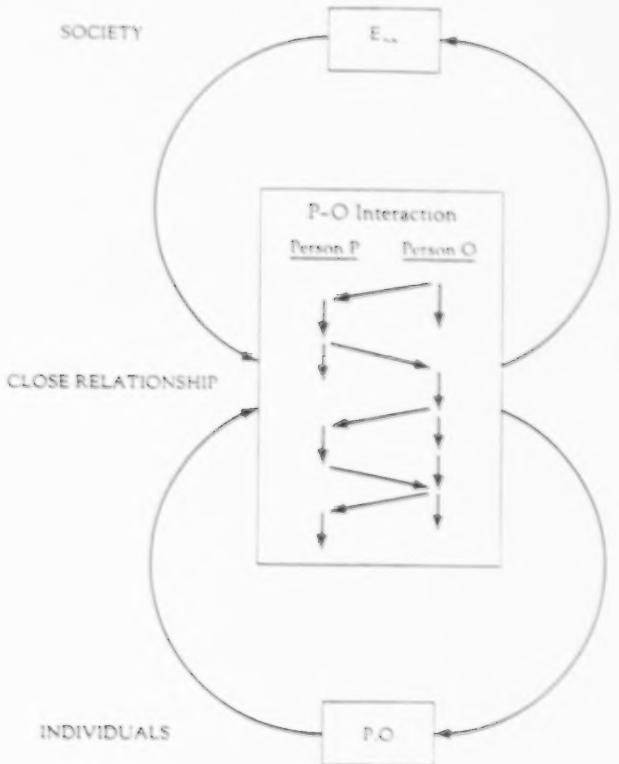

FIGURE 12.1
Schematic outline of a close relationship's causal links with its social environment and personal causal conditions. The interaction within the close relationship both (1) affects and is affected by the E_{ss} and P and O causal conditions and (2) mediates effects from society to individuals and from individuals to society.